

Chrysalis 1181

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Chapter 1181: Tunnel Tactics

Chomp! Chomp! Chomp!

Ah, the satisfying feeling of having my face hands clapping fools. The monsters of the fourth stratum are tough, there's no doubt about that, but these are all spawned during the wave, without enough evolutions or mutations to really threaten a highly developed monster like me.

A mass of boulders rumbles towards me, acting in harmony as if connected by some invisible force. An earth elemental?

Chomp!

I shatter it.

"Skreeeeee!"

A feathered worm bursts out of the soil in front of me.

Chomp!

Not today, worm!

A weird, dinosaur-looking thing charges at me, wagging its little arms.

Chomp! Chomp!

Needed two that time!

Fighting in the relatively narrow confines of the tunnels just feels more like home to me. Part of that is likely my ant nature, and the other is probably down to the circumstances of my birth. Fighting in tunnels was my first experience in the Dungeon, after all.

Of course, it's not efficient to bite all these monsters one by one, which is why Gandalf brought us awesome active Skills.

VOID CHOMP!

Empowered by the Altar, the bite shatters entire ranks of frothing beasts and I follow up with a scorching blast of Dragon's Breath, the hyper-potent jet of flame superheating even the rock of the tunnel wall. There's a lot of spells I haven't juiced up with the Altar to see their full effects, and this is merely one of them. Infused with the Will of the Colony, the spell is so searingly hot, and travels so far, that all that remains before me is melted slag and glowing rocks.

Neat.

I should probably cool the tunnel down? The ants aren't going to be able to advance and retake the next layer of walls at this rate, but if I pour water over it all, won't the rock crack? I don't want to cause instability and possibly collapse this section of tunnel....

I'll just leave it. Someone with a clearer head on their shoulders can make those sorts of decisions, my work here is done!

I retreat back to the defensive line, exchanging ant high-fives with the stout warriors of the Colony as I pass through. I have to be careful with those now. My antennae have become so large I can cause some real damage if I'm not careful, especially when I'm thwippy-thwapping with smaller castes, like mages.

"That should help relieve the pressure for a few minutes at least," I announce to Solant and her gang. "After you've evolved again, you lot will be able to get in there and do your thing too. The experience and Biomass you can accrue is second to none."

"I assume that's why we don't seal the tunnels and close off the nest?" Solant asks.

"That's right. Despite the danger, despite the casualties we inevitably suffer, it's worth it. The Colony has only grown as fast as it has thanks to our successful defence against, and harnessing of, the wave. How many thousands upon thousands of Biomass are being harvested in the second and third strata right now? How many cores? All of that is fed back into our growth, powering our mutations and evolutions, producing stronger ants."

She nods in understanding, but I have more to say.

"Don't forget that real combat is the fastest and most effective way to train your Skills, as well. With every wave, we supercharge the development of the family. Who could say how long it would have taken us to reach this point without them?"

I lead the little ants and my crew back to the command centre only to find a horde of reinforcements rushing down a different tunnel this time.

"I assume—?"

"Hurry up!" Victor yells.

"Calm yourself a little bit, sheesh!"

We spend the next few hours bouncing between different tunnels, helping to roll back the encroaching monsters and allowing the Colony to reclaim the outer defences.

Through it all, Solant and her broodmates watch everything like insectile hawks, especially their leader. They study *everything*, discussing amongst themselves as they develop ideas and strategies together. When I feel it's safe, I bring them forward and give them a taste of the fighting, along with a taste of the Biomass.

The battle down here is truly endless, as one would expect during a wave. No matter how far back I push the hordes of ravenous beasts, they return in less than ten minutes, baying for the sweet, sweet cores and food that the nest represents.

When we make our way back to the central hub this time, the activity inside is even more frenetic than usual. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that things are a whirling, manic, mess.

It's not hard to work out why, though.

“Hihi Senior! How’ve you been? I’ve been great! I’ve heard you’re *super* fast now! That’s amazing! Isn’t it amazing to go fast?! I *love* going fast! It’s the best. Crin-Crin! I haven’t seen her in a while. Is she doing well? Why isn’t she connecting a mind-bridge to me?”

Vibrant runs in circles around me, poking Crinis, who clings stubbornly to my carapace. The net result is that I am also getting poked, and I don’t like it.

“Give her a second! You can’t create magic as fast as you can run!”

“That’s too bad!”

“Slow it down! You actually managed to put a gap between each scent-word for a second there.”

[Crinis. *Please* have a chat with Vibrant for a second, she’s going to drive me crazy.]

[I didn’t have a mind-magic construct ready, Master. I’m working on it. There, got it.]

“Wow, it’s great to talk to Crin-Crin! We need to catch up more! By the by, Senior, have you been fighting down here? I’ve been in the third and it’s been *crazy*! I was all *whoosh*, and then *swoosh*, and the demons were all *raarrgggh*. I did so much running and fighting, I’m starting to close in on tier seven!”

I stare at Vibrant as she *still* runs in circles around me, randomly poking as she goes.

“Weren’t you going to talk to Crinis?”

“I am! I’m talking to you at the same time! Isn’t it great?! :D”

Holy moly. I’d forgotten about her mutated brain, she thinks just as fast as she runs. To her, we’re all talking in slow-motion. And she’s still the most dedicated of all the ants to the art of scent-moji. Some things never change.

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Chapter 1182: The Grand Strategem

With the arrival of Vibrant and her crew, who’d made the difficult trek from the Mother Tree’s portal to arrive in the new mountain-nest, the situation below ground stabilised rapidly. Just like their leader, the ten thousand ants who follow in her footsteps specialise in speed, which isn’t the most useful thing down in the tunnels, but they find ways to make it work.

They want space to best employ their greatest advantage, which meant the wide open plains of the third stratum had been the perfect battle ground for them and Vibrant had been super busy. Rushing from one pillar to the next, putting out fires, joining sieges, roaming the plains and sweeping up huge numbers of evolving demons. Down here, they use whatever space they can find, rushing along the walls and ceilings in dizzying loops.

Watching them charge into a tunnel is almost like watching a horizontal ant-tornado.

“All right, it’s rest time!” I declare cheerfully to Solant and her crew.

The twenty of them are still standing, but only just. After hour upon hour of non-stop movement, fighting and eating, they are well and truly done for the day.

Hang on a sec....

“I said we’re going to go rest, so chill out already.”

The shadows, which had been steadily deepening around us, begin to recede once more. I swear I see an antenna pop out of the darkness and wave an apology.

Did they really think they could swoop in and grab my student right in front of me?! I appreciate the dedication, but I’m not going to let them get away with skipping torpor. That’s the only time I get a break!

“Go find yourselves a spot in a barrack somewhere. I’ll come and find you in eight hours. You better have some interesting strategies cooked up by then, Solant! I’m keen to hear what you’ve been churning over in that brain of yours!”

When the exhausted ants tottle away, I turn to Crinis, Tiny and Invidia.

[You three need to keep fighting. I know you have all the Biomass and cores you need, but you're still short on Levels. The sooner you three get to tier seven, the happier I'll be. Down here in the fourth, there's all sorts of crazy monsters... and sky-snakes... and whatever that weird dinosaur thing was. So you need to evolve! Go and get some Levels!]

A thumbs up from Tiny, a long, slow blink from Invidia and a reluctant peeling from my carapace from Crinis. Soon enough, the three of them split up and head down different tunnels. With them helping alongside Vibrant’s army, things should settle down under the nest, at least for a while.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about the waves, they only get worse until the moment they finish.

With everyone else dealt with, it’s time to do the most important work of all: snooze. I’ve been working hard, dammit! I deserve a little open-eye.

I find a nice, secluded chamber, and in moments, I dip into sweet, sweet torpor.

WACCAMEOW! I’m up!

Time to round up the troops. It isn’t hard to locate Solant, thanks to the Vestibule. So far, she’s been the easiest of the champions to deal with. At least she isn’t trying to escape all the time. Or running off at full speed.

Wait a second, have all the champions been fleeing from me most of the time? What a shocking realisation!

Not so with Solant, though! Along with her crew, they are looking bright-eyed and shiny-carapaced, ready for another day of brutal and intense warfare!

“How are we, squad?” I greet them with gusto. “We’re heading back down into the tunnels today, but this time, Solant is going to be in charge of the plan.”

“I will?”

“Of course! That’s your speciality, your raisin deet ray. Or whatever. When we get down there, I want you to lay out the plan of attack. Our objective is to hold a tunnel for a few hours along with the troops there in the best way you can think of. You’ll all be fighting too, so keep that in mind.”

They really are a tight-knit and supportive group. As we march down into the bowels of the nest, the twenty of them constantly discuss and strategize, bouncing ideas off each other, critiquing and providing constructive feedback.

Solant doesn’t contribute much, but she’s always paying attention, absorbing every idea they bounce around and absorbing it into her own calculations.

When we reach the staging point, I arrive just in time to see Victor vanish into a pool of shadow. The rest of the generals in the command centre don’t react at all to the sudden abduction of their leader, but instead seamlessly flow into a new command structure, carrying on with the business of ensuring the nest’s security. So I guess we pick our own tunnel.

“Down this way,” I lead my twenty charges.

Several hundred metres from the front, I stop the procession and turn to face Solant.

“Alright then, what’s the plan?”

“I have a few ideas I want to try. Gather around, I might sketch out a few things on the floor.”

Her team skitters closer as I loom overhead, looking down.

“The vector of the enemies’ approach is predictable, which is a massive advantage. I feel it isn’t being properly utilised. I also feel like a rapid rotation of fighters will help prolong our combat effectiveness. Our goal is to swap in and out of combat every fifteen seconds, which will mean we need to utilise some adjusted formations. Spacing will be key.”

She keeps scratching away in the dirt, drawing lines, little symbols, arrows, swirls as she keeps talking... and talking... and talking.

The rest of her squad are nodding thoughtfully, absent-mindedly cleaning their antennae as they absorb the plan, but I’m rapidly running into an issue.

This plan... is... so damn detailed. I CAN’T REMEMBER ANY OF IT!

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Chapter 1183: Eldest Emergency

What to do? Do I tell them I can’t remember the plan? Would that impact my dignity as the Eldest? Maybe I’ll just play along and hope for the best. What’s the worst that could go wrong?

“Do we all understand?”

“Of course.”

“No problem.”

“Simple.”

....

"It's straightforward, I like it," I declare with every scrap of confidence I can muster. "I'll leave it to you to coordinate with the generals at the front."

"I understand."

Solant is all business, solemn and serious as she goes about plying her particular trade. When we arrive, she goes straight to the generals and begins an in-depth conversation about what she wants to do that I immediately lose track of, but they seem to follow okay.

Following that, she moves around the resting troops, ensuring they understand what to do, drawing little diagrams and even running a few drills until she's happy that they'll move the way she wants them to.

The entire time, all I hear in my mind is static. This is a problem.

Before I can work out what on Pangera I'm going to do, I run out of time. Standing on the front line as the soldiers, scouts, mages and healers ahead of me prepare to fall back, I still have absolutely no idea what I'm meant to be doing....

This could go poorly. My dignity!

"Eldest, if you'll lead the way," Solant says.

"O-of course!"

What does that mean? Lead the way literally, as in, move forward at the head of the troops? Or do we start with an acid barrage? She talked about acid, I'm sure of it.... Or magic? Was I supposed to deploy my domain, or a gravity well? I DON'T KNOW!

Tentatively, I take a few steps forward, and when nobody corrects me I take a few more. The troops behind me begin to shuffle forward and I gain a little confidence.

I creep forward a bit more. They creep along behind me.

Alright. Good so far. But now I'm worried that I'm moving too slowly, or is it too quickly? Do I stop now?

Paralyzed with indecision, I just keep scuttling forward until the ants fighting ahead of me turn and retreat, rushing past me in a blur as the ravenous monsters behind them chase close behind.

NOW WHAT?

Do I strike?

My mandibles flex, ready to unleash a powerful chomp, but I hesitate. Would that ruin the plan? I don't want to unravel the strategy! The whole point of this exercise is to train Solant and let her practise her ideas....

Alright, I won't bite. Maybe I should unleash some gravity magic, slow the enemy down for the rest of the ants to deal with? That's helpful, right?!

But what if they're counting on me *not* doing that? DAMMIT! This is giving me a headache. The monsters are almost on top of me now... what am I supposed to do?!

Too hesitant to make a move, I do the only thing I can think of: I tuck my legs under my body, bury my head in the rock and accept my fate. If I can't decide what I should do, then I shall do nothing! Clearly, this is the best course of action!

Instantly, the monsters begin to batter at my carapace. Claws scratch, teeth scrape, blows rain down on me ceaselessly. Protected by my absurdly tough, compressed diamond carapace, reinforced by the plating beneath and constantly regenerating, I take very little damage.

As the seconds tick by and my health slowly trickles down, I feel a little more calm knowing that I won't get instantly annihilated at least. I can feel the ants engaging the enemy around me, acid fills the air, a non-trivial amount of it landing on me, but I can't really blame them for that, given my size.

If any ant has acid tough enough to eat through my carapace, I'd love to meet them. In fact, it's possible a nice acid wash will give my exterior an even more impressive shine.

Still, the gnawing feeling that I'm doing something wrong continues to eat away at me, and every second, I question whether or not I should stick my head out and do *something*.

OOF!

I feel like a mountain just collapsed on me. What the heck? Judging by the mana I can feel, an earth elemental just clobbered me with one of its boulders, hard enough to create some cracking in my shell. Lousy sentient collection of rocks!

I trigger my healing gland immediately, rapidly repairing the damage. This close to so many ants, the energy flowing through the Vestibule will refill the healing gland in a minute. Realistically, I could sit here all day and probably survive just fine, provided nothing too strong found its way up the tunnels.

I can't help but feel like I've failed in this instance. I should have just confessed I didn't understand the plan, not allowed my stupid pride to shut my pheromone gland and prevent me from speaking out. Is it really so shameful if I need a barely hatched ant to walk me step by step through what they need me to do?

... YES! Yes it is!

Miserable, I park myself like a turtle in its shell and let the enemy pound on my carapace for almost half an hour, triggering my healing gland whenever necessary to mend the damage the constant barrage causes. Finally, the call blessedly comes.

"Retreat!"

Someone else's turn to step up to the front. Thank goodness. I push myself off the ground and vent my rage at the monsters in front of me with an empowered void chomp, shattering everything within range before I turn and trundle back behind the defensive line with the rest of the troops.

I'm embarrassed, frankly. Deeply embarrassed, but there's only one thing to do. I need to ant up and face the music. If the Eldest can't apologise for making a mistake, then what sort of message does that

send to the rest of the Colony? That I'm above them? That's nonsense! Just about every ant in the family is more capable than me!

I walk up to Solant and her group as they debrief each other, discussing the battle in detail.

"Look... Solant. I'm s—"

"Ah. Well done, Eldest. I wasn't sure if you'd be willing to take such an undignified role in the plan, but your dedication and humility is an inspiration to the Colony. Drawn in by your core and highly mutated Biomass, the enemy was blinded to everything else. The strategy worked flawlessly thanks to your selflessness."

"...ssssuper happy to help out. You can rely on me anytime!"

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Chapter 1184: Revisions

The Colony rapidly became a formidable fighting force once they had gained sapience. Under the leadership of the Eldest, who stamped out some of the more self-destructive ant impulses quickly, a doctrine of safety first, conservative generalship was settled as the norm.

Using our natural affinity for digging and construction, defensive battle styles in which we were able to grind down our enemies and preserve our numbers were adopted. Siege warfare utilised a similar approach, with armies of ants building enormous structures from which to launch assaults in safety.

In pitch battle, however, we relied on our superiority of numbers and the quality of our troops to win the day.

Everything changed with the emergence of Solant. Adaptive tactics, deception, lightning-fast assaults on fortified defensive positions, in the area of attack, specifically, she brought something the Colony had never even considered before.

And just in time.

- Excerpt from 'The Warfare of the Colony' by Historiant.

It turns out that Solant's plan wasn't actually that difficult to grasp, certainly not my role within it. I'd told her that the reason the monsters spawned by the wave attack the nest is because they could sense what an enormous and juicy pile of resources we are. The reason we don't close off the nest as much as possible is to accelerate our growth.

So she figured she'd replicate the strategy in miniature. She plopped an irresistibly tasty treat on the table in front of the monsters (me), and when they inevitably swarmed me, desperate to crack my outer shell and enjoy the tasty insides, they'd been even easier pickings for the rest of the ants than normal.

All of the fancy diagrams and drills were the other layer of her strategy, rapid rotations. Even that was relatively simple to grasp: she wanted to rotate the fighters more rapidly, something the Colony doesn't like to do since there's inherent danger in turning your back on the monsters in front of you.

But if everyone coordinates carefully, it's possible. She succeeded by having everyone form four identical ranks layered one behind the other and doing a neat sidestep/overstep move, where one

group stepped to the side to make space and then back, while the ranks behind climbed over them as they retreated. Each group fought for a minute before they were rotated for the group behind, moved to the back and then had three minutes of rest before they'd have to fight again.

It's the kind of detailed tactic that's only possible with a well-coordinated group who act all on the same page, but with Solant coordinating the battle, everything becomes that much simpler. As a champion, ants are drawn to follow her, believing in her and trusting she can lead them almost instinctively. The other part is her unique outlook, evolutionary choices and skillset. With her view of the battlefield, she can see problems before they happen, stepping in and coordinating plugs for holes that nobody else can see.

I get a much clearer picture of this over the course of the next few battles. We use the same strategy, but this time, I try to keep my wits about me rather than turtling up into a miserable ball. With my antennae carefully positioned, I listen in on the exchanges between the ants as the fighting rages and Solant is a constant, and I do mean *constant* presence.

Positioned just behind the front rank, she ceaselessly communicates with her troops, identifying dangers, picking up on anyone out of position, micro-managing the ants behind her to ensure they're healed, rested and ready to rejoin the fray.

She's like the boss, the secretary and the accountant all rolled into one. She has the vision, the details and the practical application to make it all happen.

One curious titbit I pick up on is that the amount of time she has to spend managing the members of her own squad is vastly less than it is for everyone else. I'm guessing that despite not being together for that long, all things considered, after training and fighting together, they've already adapted to her way of doing things and can anticipate what she wants or how she would react.

This gives me an insight to what her eventual army will look like: an entire fighting force who thinks like she does. This would dramatically reduce the amount of time and energy she would need to spend on controlling every aspect of a fight and allow her to focus more on bigger picture items.

When we retreat again, I make a point of chasing down a few ants to speak with. I'm not going to pretend I'm smart enough to know if her ideas are working well or not, I mean, it *seems* fine, but wouldn't everything work well if you have me sitting out in front taking the beating for the rest of the ants?

"Hey, you got a second?" I ask the healer in charge of medical care in this tunnel, Fixant.

"No."

"Think you can make some time then?"

"No."

"Great. I wanted to ask if you think these rapid rotation tactics are helping lighten the load for the healers?"

The healer sighs, her antennae drooping.

"It's hard to tell considering you're the one taking the most damage and we don't have to heal you at all. We've had very little to do during the shifts you're out there."

Good point.

All right then, time to take the training wheels off.

"Solant, you're going out there without me next time. I want to see how you go without me helping."

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Chapter 1185: Training Ground

The Eldest had laid down the challenge and Solant could feel the pressure immediately. Someone like her, not even a full graduate of the Antcademy, was to be put in charge of a battlefield during a wave. Only the authority of the Eldest made something like this possible, the defenders of the nest put their faith in their strongest member and trusted that Solant would not fail them.

The pressure was immense.

Clearly, the Eldest intended to put her and her broodmates directly into the fire, the only place the strongest steel could be forged. The weight of responsibility settled on her carapace immediately, a crushing weight that threatened to drive even the mana from her core.

She welcomed it. More than that, she *relished* it.

"I am grateful to the Eldest," she told her precious sisters as they gathered in their chamber after torpor. "Either we are right in what we do and how we do it, or we are wrong. If we are wrong, let us fail now, before too much damage can be done. If we are right, then let us succeed, and lead the family to victory."

The others listened solemnly, fully aware of what was riding on their performance in battle that day.

"We're with you," Leonidant assured her. "All the way."

"Of course. There's no such thing as a general, unless there is an army."

Two parts of a single whole.

When they emerged from the chamber, they found the Eldest and the three guardians waiting for them.

"Ready for the big day?" the Eldest asked, looming over them without trying to.

"Of course," Solant confirmed, no hint of wavering in her scent.

"Good. You're in charge, lead the way."

A little taken aback at the thought of leading the Eldest anywhere in the nest, Solant nevertheless stepped forward and marched to the centre of the enormous staging chamber, in which the gathered generals administered the never ending defensive battle.

Hordes of ants swarmed everywhere, rushing in and out of the dozens of tunnels that led from this one central hub. Some were returning to rest, others shifting from one field of engagement to another. The

priorities under the nest changed from minute to minute, depending on what dreadful creatures emerged from the depths.

Luckily, Vibrant and her army were still in attendance. With their unmatched speed, they could leap from one hotspot to another, the best relief force in the entire Colony.

"I will take command of the A3 tunnel for the next twelve hours," Solant announced to the frazzled Victor, who sat surrounded by messengers and generals on all sides.

"What?!" the general shouted, then noticed the Eldest looming in the back. "Oh. Fine. Go quickly and don't make any mistakes. We're hard pressed down here and it'll be tough to cover for you."

"Don't worry. We will achieve victory."

After announcing this, the little general turned and led her procession to the tunnel scent-marked as A3. She had led the troops in this segment before and hopefully they remembered her preferred arrangements.

When she arrived, she immediately made contact with the general in charge of the tunnel.

"I've been instructed to take command of the tunnel for the next twelve hours," she announced to the far larger and more experienced general.

The ant sized her up in an instant.

"I remember you. The changeover is happening in two hours. I'll inform the other generals, you should go talk to the troops."

"Thank you," Solant snapped out a quick salute with her antennae which was returned before the two generals went their separate ways.

Seemingly uninterested by the minutiae of leadership, the Eldest moved to one side of the tunnel and flopped down with the three guardians beside them. It hurt her heart to see the strongest fighting force of the Colony doing nothing, but then she shook her head.

The Eldest is here for you, she reminded herself, if they don't think it's a waste of time, then it isn't.

With her broodmates around her, Solant took the time to speak to all of the troops waiting for their turn on the frontline. She needed to check in with the healers, the soldiers, the scouts, the mages and the core shapers and cover her ideas in detail, especially since there would be changes this time around.

"You mean the Eldest *isn't* going to let the monsters attack their carapace?" one of the larger and stronger soldiers asked.

"That's right," Solant nodded, before she stepped forward and prodded the tier six soldier with one antenna, "which means we are going to get some work out of you this time."

"Good! I was starting to worry I was getting lazy."

"We have formation practice in an hour," she informed them, "we need to go over the rapid rotation and the new manoeuvre, which I call tea and biscuits."

“Sounds... delicious?”

“It’s meant to.”

With the authority of the Eldest and the certain knowledge that nothing could go too wrong so long as the strongest ant in the Colony was standing behind them, the ants were more than happy to go along with whatever Solant had to say.

Well before they were due to fight, she had them running exhausting drills, doing everything she could to prepare her troops for the trials to come. She was everywhere, picking up on every tiny mistake and correcting it on the spot. If a soldier put a leg out of place, or a mage mistimed their spell, or a healer was too slow to rotate, Solant would appear like magic, patiently explaining what had gone wrong and what the result would be in battle were the error to be replicated.

Battles were won on the training ground.

This was another core tenet of Solant’s philosophy, and she wished she had far more time to ingrain even these simple formations into her troops, but that wasn’t how things had shaken out and she made her peace with that. Before too long, it was time to rotate and replace the troops battling hard on the frontline. With her excitement bottled tightly deep within her thorax, Solant led her first army to the battlefield, nothing but victory in her eyes.

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Chapter 1186: Leader

As they drew closer to the front, the endless roars of monsters grew deafening until Solant’s antennae were vibrating from the force of it. Her general’s eye crackled into life the closer they got to the field, her intuition and mutations blending together to give her an almost supernatural sense for the battlefield.

The ants were tired, which was to be expected. They moved sluggishly, taking more damage than they should, and attacked without sharpness, inflicting less punishment on the enemy than they were capable of.

This was a compounding problem that led to more damage being taken and more ground lost as the shifts dragged on. Of course, the Colony could simply rotate the ants more often, but that introduced more problems than it solved. Logistically, shifting hundreds of thousands of ants around was a nightmare already, doing it more often would just compound the issue.

Despite the huge numbers of ants inside the nest, there was far more fighting taking place than any of the leadership had expected. The tunnels beneath the nest were absurdly extensive, as if a tunnel network the size of the entire first stratum had been bolted onto the bottom of the mountain. The absurd number and size of monsters appearing out of the waters had also taken the Colony by surprise, drawing their resources even thinner.

Solant would need her current group of troops to hold at the front for four hours before they would be relieved by the next shift. In another two hours' time, she would arrange for the incoming ants to go through the same drills the current group had under the leadership of her sisters, since she wouldn’t leave the front.

"Get ready to charge," she announced calmly as the massive soldiers and scouts clacked their mandibles eagerly.

She watched the fighting ahead with her intense gaze, waiting for the perfect moment.

The monsters surged, the ants reared back, and she had found the timing.

"Charge," she said.

Her troops rushed forward, covering half of the tunnel surface as they ran. The thousands of ants already fighting saw their approach and the general in charge coordinated the retreat.

"Acid and magic blast, go!" she roared and the exhausted troops gave everything they had left to beat back the monsters and give them the separation they needed to retreat.

It was a delicate moment, and Solant watched carefully as the current shift began to compress their formation and fall back. An almost bizarre sight, like two fluids moving in opposite directions through a single pipe, took place as the retreating ants crushed into one side flowed back to safety while Solant and her fresh army pushed forward, towards the enemy.

"Snap into place and brace," she instructed the soldiers in front and they knew exactly what to do.

Right at the front of the formation, Solant had picked the exact moment the retreating line of soldiers had passed them and had her own reform the line, covering the entire ring of the tunnel's surface. The soldiers rushed into position and braced themselves, ready to receive the deadly charge of the monsters ahead.

That charge came swift and brutal. Larger and stronger than what the Colony had fought higher in the Dungeon, the beasts of the fourth were fewer in number, but much harder to deal with.

An enormous, elongated caterpillar squirmed towards them, acid rolling from its body and sizzling on the rocks below. The soldiers received its charge, ignoring the pain as the burning liquid splashed on their carapace. With their enormous heads and reinforced mandibles, they latched onto the beast, halting its momentum and tearing at its soft flesh as the rest of the formation took shape behind them.

"Hold," Solant informed them, "ten seconds."

It was important not to rush, despite the danger to the soldiers on the front. If the rest of the troops were sloppily arranged and asked to engage before they were ready, it could upset the flow of battle for the next several minutes. She would gladly allow an extra few seconds to ensure that didn't happen.

"Step back on the left."

"Push forward."

"You're not in line, watch your flanks."

A steady flow of calm commands rolled from her pheromone gland to the struggling soldiers, helping them to hold the line and avoid the worst of the acid until, finally, the defensive position had been established.

"Fire on my command," Solant ordered, waiting a beat, then, "fire."

Scout acid and magic blasts slammed into the caterpillar's face, sending the monster reeling back.

"Again on my command... fire."

The moment it regained its balance, the beast was hit again. It screeched in fury and retreated slightly. An opening.

"Advance ten metres," Solant snapped.

Already an opportunity to move the line forward had appeared; she wouldn't say no. Ground taken now could be freely given later, when her troops were more fatigued.

Moving as one entity, the entire force of thousands of ants surged forward ten metres and reengaged the caterpillar, seizing on its weakness and putting it down.

With a moment of respite, the beast was dragged to the back of the formation. Valuable Biomass that would help heal and refuel the army.

The first minute had passed.

"Rotate," Solant ordered.

Step, step, *dash*.

Just like that, the frontline troops swapped over. The first wave of soldiers moved to the back of the line where they were fed and received medical care while a fresh group replaced them. The same occurred behind them, as mages and scouts repeated the move, their accompanying generals holding position at the front of the formation.

Just in time. More monsters were coming.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1187: Gravity

Solant felt as if her mind was balanced on a mandible's edge. She saw everything that occurred and her mind catalogued every event, filing them, ordering them, and then she responded to each in turn as best she could.

Minute by minute, her four groups rotated through, regardless of the conditions at the front. The ravenous, unthinking beasts of the wave weren't watching or analysing their movements, and so didn't anticipate or take advantage of the minute openings in her tidy formation the manoeuvre created, as a disciplined and thinking opponent would.

Adjust the tactics to suit the opponent. There was no such thing as a universal strategy.

Another of her idioms.

The monsters of the wave were crazed, desperate and savage, throwing themselves against her defensive position over and over again. Many times, she was forced to give ground, only to claw it back later.

Fortunately, she didn't have to employ her new move until the troops had settled into a good rhythm.

From around the corner, Solant spotted a new threat approaching: a shimmering turtle, almost the same size as the Eldest, glimmering with energy that rolled from it in waves. Her front line was currently occupied with a pack of ape-like creatures that could summon clouds to obscure their bodies and even phase themselves into the mist.

“Hard push,” she ordered, “starting in ten seconds.”

The energy and mana available to her troops was a resource that had to be carefully managed, but she ordered them to spend it. Ten seconds later, a barrage of fire burned away the cloud and apes alike, allowing the soldiers to latch onto the struggling monsters and bring them down.

“Rotate,” she ordered, not missing a beat and allowing her formation the few seconds necessary to switch. “Forward.”

Huddled just behind the front line of soldiers, she had a good view of the monsters approaching down the tunnel, and at this moment, the giant turtle was the only thing coming. She wanted a little extra room to work with as they engaged the beast.

“Tea and biscuits in ten seconds.”

A moment of hesitation rippled through the troops, a result of their lack of familiarity with the tactic. The ants began to respond, urged by her broodmates amongst their ranks, and Solant picked up the slack, issuing incisive orders.

The turtle represented exactly the kind of opponent the Colony was struggling with in the fourth. Too tough for them to bring down efficiently, resulting in their lines being pushed in, the troops exhausted and vulnerable to whatever came next.

Having them fruitlessly flail against the Eldest’s undefeatable carapace while everyone else poured on damage was one option, but was probably the *least* effective use of that particular individual's talents. Tea and biscuits was a new attempt at implementing an old strategy.

Each second that passed, the monster loomed closer and Solant prepared to engage her stratagem. The turtle crashed closer... closer still!

“Now!” she snapped.

Several things happened at once. The front line drew back, while two scouts slid in behind her and seized hold of her back legs. Once she felt that contact, Solant threw herself forward and rotated to land on her back.

“Oh no!” she cried, though it was unlikely the turtle could smell pheromones. “It’s a disaster!”

Then she waggled her four free legs helplessly.

Not many ants had enjoyed successive special evolutions as she had. In fact, vanishingly few had that privilege compared to the enormous numbers of the Colony. Could she compare to the delicious ten course meal that the Eldest represented?

Not even remotely. But she was, at the very least, a delectable snack. Tea and biscuits.

Enraged and unthinking, the turtle lunged for her, its hooked maw open wide, but the scouts dashed away like lightning, dragging the general with them. Of course, they didn't go too far.

Solant remained, wagging her legs helplessly, just out of the monster's reach.

Furious at being denied, the turtle pushed itself up again and rumbled forward, its jaws gnashing with hunger and rage. The scouts kept Solant just out of reach as they lured the turtle deeper and deeper.

And then the trap was sprung.

While being focused on the helpless little treat in front of it, the monster had been lured deep into the ant formation and was now surrounded on all sides.

"Attack!" Solant ordered.

Three quarters of her force descended on the beast, striking at its flanks, its tail, from underneath and above while the last division once again sealed the tunnel and defended it from whatever may come next. With only twenty-five percent of their force dedicated to holding the tunnel, the ants knew they were in a race against the clock to defeat the turtle and so threw everything they had at it, reserving nothing in an effort to bring it down.

Solant watched with satisfaction as it eventually fell. Fighting it head-on would have been difficult, to say the least, exhausting her forces. Since these maddened monsters were so easy to deceive, it seemed a waste to fail to take advantage of it, luring them into even more unfavoured ground than they were in already.

It wasn't as if the plan was without risks, but it could certainly be changed to add layers of safety. It wasn't even necessary to dangle an ant as bait, as she had done. With some time and preparation, a sufficiently large core could be used to lure the beasts deeper into the ant nest where they could be crushed from all sides.

"Reform the line!" Solant demanded. "The formation must be established in ten seconds! Go!"

As the frontline held on, the rest of the army scrambled to fall in behind them, and soon enough, they resumed their rotations, the little general managing the entire field of battle like clockwork.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1188: Recovery and Analysis

I watched the battle unfold with a keen interest, using all of the senses at my disposal to follow the goings on. As large as I am, it wasn't really practical for me to shove myself forward and block up the tunnel, I'd destroy the formation I was trying to inspect!

So I fall back on my more esoteric options, such as the Vestibule.

Despite what Solant may think, tracking one ant's flow of Will through the glittering organ isn't nearly the same as mind reading. It's not even like I'm following the path of their thoughts. More like... I'm getting a stream-of-consciousness flow of their wants and goals. It's *Will*, after all, not thoughts.

This is why it can be so difficult for me to separate myself from the Will of the Colony at times. When a hundred thousand or more individuals all want the same thing, all willing for it to occur, that becomes a very difficult impulse for me to resist!

At any rate, the battle is travelling extremely smoothly, which pleases me. What Solant needs to grow and develop as a Champion is very different than what the last two needed.

As a general, there's only one way for her to improve, and that's to be out and about generalling! And she needs to be in charge of her own battles, because putting her under the regular generals will just stifle her creativity!

The troops continue to rotate every four hours, including the little general's broodmates, coming in and out of the front with the rest of the troops, but Solant remains at the coalface, working her little thorax off until the very last minute.

When the full twelve hour shift is done, she comes back along with the last set of troops, exhausted, but clearly pleased with herself.

"You look happy. It all went well then?" I ask.

She considers seriously before replying, as is her habit.

"It went satisfactorily," she demurs, "there are many areas I can still improve, and with more time to work with the troops, I'm sure we can reach a much higher level of performance."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much," I mutter, watching the ants stroll past.

After being exposed to the unique charisma of a Champion, there's no doubt this lot will be all too happy to join the eventual army that will form around Solant. She'll have all the time she needs to whip them into shape.

"Regardless, you'll be back here tomorrow, and every day for the next week, for that matter. You've got to continue to develop your Skills and ideas, and the only way I know to make you do that is to shove you into battles over and over again. Don't worry, though, I'll be hanging around the whole time, so things can't go all that wrong! Rest assured!"

This is absolutely *not* a scheme to get more rest and relaxation for myself. Not at all.

"So you should just go back and get some rest," I continue, "you must be exhausted after twelve hours of directing the fighting."

Solant looks at me like I'm crazy.

"I've got four hours left before mandatory torpor and an almost unlimited number of things to do before tomorrow. What about the review? Or the brainstorm discussion? Five items of improvement? We need to drill! At least four rounds of drills! I have a hundred formation adjustments I want to make, and a list of things to discuss with the core shapers!"

"Uhhhh."

But... rest?

“I guess... you go for it. I’ll be over here if you... if you need me, I suppose.”

Not needing any further encouragement, Solant speeds off to gather her faithful and loyal nineteen broodmates together for an intense session of antennae thwapping and waggling. After thirty minutes of this, they rush off to gather the off-duty shifts, and soon enough, I’m treated to the sight of the little general running the ants through their paces.

It looks... tiring.

When the heck is she going to be done?!

She said she had four hours until her mandatory torpor and she uses every little bit of it to keep training with the troops until her time runs out. Before the shadows can begin to materialise, she sprints back to her resting chamber along with the rest of her sisters and I’m sure they waste no time getting themselves to sleep.

For my part, I stand and stretch. I’ve got an eight hour break from babysitting, so I might as well go and make myself useful.

[Come on, you three. Let’s go and fight something. I don’t think I’ll need you tomorrow, so you may as well stay out and get some Levels.]

[Are you sure, Master?] Crinis is clearly reluctant.

[Yes I’m sure. If I could, I’d tell you to stay out until you reached max Level!]

[Noooo.]

She clings to my carapace and I swear I feel my organs constrict. Better not to think about it.

[Go on, get!] I shoo the blob of endless nightmares away, and she reluctantly peels herself off my carapace and vanishes into the shadows.

Tiny is long gone at this point, Invidia drifting along behind him. At their current level of evolution, they’re stronger than any ant out there, with the possible exception of Vibrant, and me, obviously, but when they evolve again, some new powerhouses will be introduced to the family.

I can hardly wait.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1189: Old Dogs, Old Tricks

Titus took another deep, slow breath, feeling the mana thunder through his body, tearing away at him from the inside. The conflict was never-ending. Much like the wave that ravaged his world, the raw arcane energy that permeated the Dungeon poured into him and sought to rend his flesh.

How long had it been since he’d sustained himself this deep? Before his children had been born. He’d been a much younger man then, in body and mind. In those days, he’d relished the struggle to master himself, to harness the power that pulsed in the veins of his post-baptism body. Now, he simply endured, patiently waiting as his condition slowly adapted to this new normal.

“You look miserable,” Minerva observed from somewhere nearby.

The commander kept his eyes closed.

"This is my normal face," he said.

"I know."

He felt a sharp poke on his forehead, but didn't react, controlling his breathing instead. He'd learned a long time ago that the best way to annoy his fire-breathing monster of a wife was to simply not react. Sure enough, after he maintained his routine for another minute, he received a quick 'paff' to the top of his head.

"How can you sit there all day?" Minerva grumped. "If you don't move soon you're going to grow moss."

"Unlike some, who were relaxing deep in the Dungeon, I've spent the bulk of the last twenty years on the surface, darling wife, and I need time to adapt to these conditions. I feel like a highly qualified officer in the Legion would have known that before she dragged me down here in the first place."

"What cheek," she harrumphed, giving him another soft thwap on the head which he barely felt.

If she wanted him to feel it, then he surely would. At least the famed berserker had learned *some* restraint over her tenure as Consul.

"I'm just impatient to see you in action again. You must be getting bored being cooped up in this adaptation chamber all day every day. Are you sorry I brought you down here?"

At her words, he opened his eyes finally and saw she *was* looking genuinely apologetic. He was taken aback slightly.

"Have you gone soft?" he demanded.

"No. This just isn't the romantic getaway I'd been hoping for."

He wasn't quite sure if she was joking. It was entirely possible that Minerva *did* consider the two of them returning to the Dungeon's depths to fight against the most deadly monsters a Legionary could face as a romantic getaway. It was how they'd spent the early years of their marriage, after all.

"No need to get your Praetorian armour in a twist. I think I'm pretty much ready to go."

Despite all the time they'd been together, it still moved him to see her eyes light up.

"Really? *Finally!*"

She latched onto his arm and began to try and drag him from his seat.

"Well what are we waiting for? Time to suit up! Let's go, let's go!"

Titus did his best to prevent his wife from dragging him out of the chamber.

"Hold on a minute, Minerva. Wait, damn you!"

"What now?" she demanded, turning back to look at him.

"I need to get dressed. After that, I need to report to command. After that, I need to speak to the armoury. After that, I need to acclimate to the suit. There's a laundry list of things I need to do before I

can sortie and fight. Not all of us can jump into Praetorian armour after a ten year break without batting an eye.”

“Not my fault you can’t handle it,” she huffed.

“Nobody said it was.”

Attempting to keep up with Minerva was a waste of time, even though she didn’t see it that way. If he wanted to do his duty and perform as well as he knew he could, then he would take his time and do things by the book.

If he ran out there now, he was just as likely to chop his own foot off. Minerva had arranged for his old Praetorian suit to be delivered here, and once upon a time, that armour had been just as comfortable as his own skin, but it’d been near twenty years since he’d been inside it. Slow and steady was his way.

“Fine, fine,” his wife gave in, “have it your way. I guess I’ll go sortie and cut something to pieces to relieve some stress.”

“Good luck, dearest,” he chuckled before he pulled her in for a quick, one-armed hug. “I’ll be out there soon enough, don’t you worry. If I perform too badly, they’ll wonder why you ever married me.”

“They’d never dare,” her eyes flashed before she stepped out of the chamber and rushed off to the armoury. Idly, he wondered if there was even a group heading out, or if it mattered. It was hard to say no to a former Consul, let alone *that* one.

The commander flexed his hands, slowly closing them into fists and then relaxing them again.

He’d not been exposed to this much mana since... he couldn’t remember. Had there ever been a time when the density had been this high? This series of waves, which had begun just before the discovery of that ant colony, showed no signs of stopping.

Would it ever end?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1190: Old Dogs, Old Tricks pt 2

“Engineer Griner?” Titus rumbled.

“That’d be me. You must be the commander?” the burly, sleeveless man said as he turned from the enormous armoured suit he’d been working on.

Titus rolled his shoulders.

“Just about everyone down here is a commander, or higher,” he noted wryly, “so why would I be, ‘the commander’?”

Griner shrugged.

“I don’t make the rules. Turns out when you command successfully down here *and* up there, people take notice.”

Some in the Legion thought that the soldiers stationed in the deep looked down on those fighting high in the Dungeon, but that was far from the truth. Legionaries in these depths relied on the plentiful mana, powerful techniques and equipment it enabled to fight. In the first stratum, they would be helpless.

“‘Titus’ is fine, Engineer Griner. Now, I’m told you’re the man who’s been taking care of the old girl. How is she?”

The two turned and looked up at the intimidating suit of Praetorian armour looming over them. At eight metres tall, the suit wasn’t close to the largest the Legion could field, but the added bulk of thick armour certainly meant it was on the heavier side. Without a weapon or shield, the suit looked... undressed, but still presented an intimidating visage. Brought across the chest, with thick pauldrons at the shoulders and the Legionem Abyssis emblem engraved on the front. The decorative touches around the edges of the plates imbued it with a tangible sense of gravitas.

“I won’t say she’s as good as new. I’ve given it the once over, and, mechanically, she’s as sound as can be.”

“What about the mana circuits?”

“Aye, we’ve had those inspected as well. She’s been through a lot over the years, been assigned to two others after you left. Didn’t do nearly as well, but serviceable enough. Lot of wear and tear is what I’m trying to say, I guess.”

“But she’s functional? Ready to deploy?”

“Ready as she’ll ever be. Without ripping out the core and rebuilding the damn suit from scratch, we aren’t going to be able to do better than this. It won’t be too much longer before the old girl needs to be decommissioned, but for now, she’s clear to fight.”

Titus nodded gratefully, reaching out a hand to press against the cold, Abyssal Iron plating.

Indomitable. It had been his Praetorian suit for almost ten years. Seeing it now was... hard to describe, like an old friend, or pet, that he’d never really thought he would meet again.

“No point in delaying. Can you help get it ready? I want to try a test run.”

“Sure thing, Commander.”

Commander again. He rolled his eyes. He hoped whoever had the misfortune to take over his last command was having more luck with the troops than he was.

The two men were alone in the armoury. Unsurprising, given so many of the bays were empty at the moment. Clearly, Minerva had been in luck and there was a fight going on somewhere. Of the twenty open bays that held the Praetorian suits, all but three were empty.

Dim, silver light glowered from overhead, gleaming off the polished metal of *Indomitable* as Titus moved to the back and began to climb up the suit. He definitely had a few more twinges in his shoulders than the last time he’d done this, but it didn’t overly matter. In short order, he reached the shoulders and triggered the mechanism to open the suit.

Immediately, the back armour fell away as the head rose up, creating a gap for him to slip inside.

“Go on in and get yourself comfortable. I’ll hook up the liquid mana once you are ready,” Griner called up.

“Thanks,” Titus acknowledged.

Carefully, he slipped inside the enormous metal suit, closing the opening behind him. When the metal clanged shut, followed by the audible *click* as it locked and sealed, he became enveloped in total darkness.

It didn’t matter. He’d spent so long inside this suit, he could find what he needed without light.

He stretched out his arms, finding the panels and grips that he sought, wrapping his thick fingers around them. He settled his feet, pressing them into the paddles below, feeling them mould to the shape of his toes.

He leaned forward, pressing his face into the mask, the matrix that melded his consciousness with the armour. He *tsked*. Whoever was in the suit last had been a touch shorter than him, he’d need to adjust the angle.

A hollow clang rang from the side of the armour.

“You ready in there?” came a muffled voice.

“Ready,” Titus replied.

He tensed, but had to wait a few long moments before the sudden deluge began. The liquid mana burned like ice, froze like fire and forced pure arcane power into his veins. He gasped at the touch of it, then grit his teeth against the pain as the hollow inside of the suit began to fill from his feet up.

It was agonising. His body, which had barely become adapted to the level of mana he was exposed to at this depth, was *flooded* with more, stretching him to the point of bursting. He endured.

When it reached his waist, he called out, “That’s enough!” and the flow, which had been running down his back, slowed to a trickle, then stopped.

“I’ve disconnected the hose!” he heard from outside. “Try walking around!”

“Alright then, Titus,” he muttered to himself through gritted teeth, “let’s see if you can remember how to do this.”

Without delaying any further, he pressed his face to the mask and felt his consciousness get sucked from his body and suffused with dark, cold iron.